

Trauma, Healing and Narrative in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*

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Abstract—Traumatic experiences are often claimed as unspeakable and beyond the reach of language. Nevertheless, literature has always found a way to express these inexpressible pains and depict the traumatic experiences of its characters. Using Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, this study explores trauma narrative within a mixed-race family dealing with the hidden pain of loss in 1970s America. This novel is very detailed in depicting the racial, gender, and intergenerational trauma suffered by the Lee family in the social dynamics of race and gender discrimination. This paper, therefore, focuses on the individual traumas of James Lee, Marilyn, and their daughter Lydia, as well as on their recovery from trauma, by examining how these traumas intersect with social pressures to shape the characters' life trajectories and the dynamics of the family. This paper also examines the trauma narrative strategies that Celeste Ng uses to give voice to traumatic experiences, with an emphasis on how Celeste Ng invites readers to reflect on issues of race, gender, and generational divide in the context of globalization. In this manner, this study contributes to the development of literary trauma studies, provides some therapeutic values for those who have similar experiences, and prompts readers to think about social inequality across the globe and come up with the idea of creating a better and more inclusive future.

Index Terms—*Everything I Never Told You*, trauma, healing, narrative, self-redemption

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese American literature has, since its inception, been preoccupied with the foundational themes of identity and cultural conflict. As a product of cross-cultural exchange, Chinese American writers have explored how individuals find their place between two cultures by portraying the immigrant experience, family dynamics, and racial prejudice. What makes these issues particularly problematic for Chinese American writers is their dual marginalisation: on the one hand, they are rejected by mainstream society as ethnic minorities; on the other hand, they maintain a subtle connection to the traditional culture of their ancestors. This struggle between cultures has become a defining feature of Chinese American literature. However, despite this distinctive focus, Chinese American literature has faced critiques regarding its narrative content. The focus on issues concerning ethnic minorities in these works often overshadows broader human experiences and more complex social issues. This narrative tendency may lead readers to reduce the creations of Chinese American writers to a simple manifestation of racial identity while ignoring the diversity and universality of their literary contributions (Chiang, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Celeste Ng's debut novel *Everything I Never Told You* provides a groundbreaking narrative paradigm for Chinese American literature. Rather than limiting her work to "telling a story about being a Chinese American," (Cheng, 2003, p. 53) she explores the complex interactions between family, race, gender, and society from a diversity of perspectives, and demonstrates a unique creative philosophy. She emphasises the universality and diversity of the work itself, rather than focusing solely on the ethnic identities of the characters, which makes this novel different from traditional Chinese American literature, as its narrative goes beyond the homogenised perspective of racial identity and focuses more on universal human experiences and social interactions.

This novel was inspired by a story told by Ng's husband, who is a white American man: his classmate from primary school once pushed the classmate's sister into the water. Although the girl was rescued, the incident triggered Ng's deeper thoughts about family relationships and human behaviour (Penguin Books USA, 2014). Based on this story, Ng wrote this novel centering around a mixed-race family living in 1970s America, where the father, James, has long suffered from racial discrimination because of his Chinese ethnicity; the mother, Marilyn, is a white American whose professional

aspirations are interrupted by family responsibilities, and these unfulfilled aspirations are ultimately projected onto their daughter, Lydia. Unfortunately, the parents' weighty expectations exacerbate the tensions within the family, driving Lydia to despair and ultimately leading to her tragic death by drawing in the lake. The narrative not only shows how family and social oppression intertwine to affect individual psychology, but also reveals multilayered social issues through the lens of intergenerational transmission of trauma.

Trauma often buries itself deep within the psyche whence it becomes barely visible yet highly influential, since it affects not only individuals, but also the life trajectories and emotional connections of family members (Raihanah & Idrus, 2022). In literature, trauma narratives have the importance of exposing such injuries, recounting a character's inner turmoil while capturing the social causes of that person's suffering. While they make it possible for the readers to get an insight into aspects of the character's psychological trauma, they also help in creating a view of the parameters of the correlation between personal suffering and social problems (Morrissey, 2021). In this regard, Celeste Ng's novel, celebrated as the Best Book of 2014 by Amazon and National Public Radio in the United States, stands as a valuable case study in the dimension of literary trauma studies. This novel intricately weaves together personal grief and social issues into traumatic narrative of a mixed-race family, as it captures important undercurrents of discrimination based on color, sexism, and complex familial relationships. Trauma, as a kind of personal suffering, does not only affect the characters' behaviors and decisions but also concerns the very plot of the novel. Therefore, the consideration of trauma would reveal the characters' suffering and their personal and interpersonal experiences of identity, family relationships, and social expectations.

Based on the above illustration, this paper thus attempts to delve deep into the investigation of trauma narrative in Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You* by critically interpreting and analysing the portrayal of trauma, the process of trauma recovery, and the use of narrative strategies in this novel. Specifically, the research objectives of this paper include: (1) to reveal the manifestations of racial, gender, and intergenerational traumas in the novel to explore how these traumas are manifested in the characters' psychology and behaviour through the tensions between the individual and the society, as well as how the family and the society interact with each other to exacerbate the intergenerational transmission of trauma; and (2) to analyse the process of trauma recovery and study the mechanism of memory, reflection and self-repair of the characters after the traumatic experience; (3) to explore the strategies of narrating trauma in the novel for the purpose to demonstrate how these strategies can enhance the depth of the narration and the social critique of the text.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior literary reviews and research have approached and discussed the multiple themes that are present in this novel, such as the bicultural conflicts, spatial representation, ethical considerations, and the subject of family secrets. Current studies address how bicultural conflict influences the formation of identity and social exclusion and the effects on the character, as Yin and Liu (2016) have identified. However, these analyses do not delve into how this othering inflicts psychological trauma and causes lasting damage to individual self-perception. The characters in Ng's novel, especially Lydia and her mother Marilyn, not only face identity crises brought on by biculturalism but also endure accumulated intergenerational trauma. Additionally, Shen and Xie (2017) categorize and analyze the spatial narrative, highlighting how physical, social, spiritual, and textual spaces enhance the novel's readability and artistic quality, while their analysis primarily focuses on the superficial aspects of space. Space is not only a manifestation of social and cultural oppression but also reveals the inner trauma of the characters, especially how psychic spaces are invaded by historical and cultural wounds. The spaces inhabited by Ng's characters do not just restrict their actions and choices; they also become sites of inescapable trauma.

On the ethical aspect, focusing on marriage, parent-child, and sibling ethics, Shen and Yang (2018) stress the role of a healthy family environment for child development. Yet they fail to realize that apart from the actual passing of the hurt and suffering, the intergenerational transfer of trauma within the family is very effective and prominent in affecting people. Lydia's identity crisis and her ultimate tragedy stem not only from concerns of familial ethical issues but are very much related to unresolved and painful personal histories of her parents most especially Marilyn's unfulfilled ambitions, which are subtly passed down to her daughter. Ibarrola-Armendariz (2021), as well as Zhou and Omar (2022), highlights the importance of family secrets and the psychic realm of women in understanding the role of social complexity and latent family conflict for characters; however, they do not address how trauma is produced and sustained in this context. Family secrets are not just structural elements that drive the plot but the way they are portrayed in this novel as a trauma. Lydia's death thus can be regarded as an event that brings into the open the trauma that has been latent within the family for a long time. This aspect of trauma affects not only the psychological condition of characters but also the dissolution of family dynamics.

In conclusion, after reviewing all these recent studies, this study finds that there is a lack of perspectives in the existing research that explores this novel as a comprehensive exploration of trauma narratives. The current study aspires to explore how racial discrimination and gender bias exacerbate individual and collective trauma through familial and social mechanisms, and how individuals gradually achieve recovery and self-redemption through traumatic experiences. At the same time, the study will also analyse how the novel's multi-layered narrative strategies are effective in presenting the complexity of trauma and provide readers with new perspectives to understand the profound connection between trauma and social dynamics.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to construct an integrative theoretical framework from a variety of existing theories of literary trauma to explore how trauma narratives reveal the complex relationship between the individual and society. The concept of trauma has been an important tool for literary studies to understand human psychology and social dynamics. Trauma narratives show diverse forms and characteristics in different cultural backgrounds and historical contexts. Drawing theoretical insights from Caruth's (1996) concept of trauma, this paper aims to view trauma not only as a psychological injury, but also as a dynamic process that is continually recycled and transmitted through memories, narratives, and social interactions. According to these theoretical perspectives, trauma both reflects individual suffering and reveals the role of social structures and environmental factors in the formation and perpetuation of trauma. Caruth (1996) defines trauma as a profound disruption in an individual's experience of time, memory, and identity that stems from an overwhelming event that the mind cannot fully process. She provides a perspective on theorising trauma in a way that highlights two critical aspects of trauma: "a crisis of death," which refers to the overwhelming impact of a life-threatening event; and "a crisis of life," which relates to the ongoing struggle to integrate and make sense of the traumatic experience (Caruth, 1996, p. 7). These two aspects relate to two dimensions of a traumatic experience: the event itself and the after-effect of the event, which could be described as "a double wound" (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). This concept reveals that trauma is not just present in the violent or original events of an individual's past, but rather in its latency, which refers to the ways in which trauma's incompletely assimilated or understood qualities, and the state of being insufficiently aware at the occurrence of the event, can resurface later to haunt the survivor. Therefore, trauma is not only a direct impact on the individual, but also includes its continuing consequences, which continue to affect the individual's life at the level of memory, emotion, and identity, and may extend further to the intergenerational level. The continuing effects of dual trauma provide an important theoretical basis for understanding intergenerational trauma. Emotions and memories that trauma survivors have not fully processed may be unconsciously passed on to future generations through family relationships, behavioural patterns, and socio-cultural interactions, allowing the pain and struggles of trauma to continue across generations (Schwab, 2010). Successive generations not only inherit the unresolved effects of trauma from previous generations, but also need to deal with the psychological and social dilemmas that arise from it.

Trauma is a complex and continuous experience, therefore, the process of recovery from trauma is not only about the reconstruction of the individual psyche, but also involves a connection to society and history. Caruth (1996) argues that the key to trauma recovery lies in creating a narrative space in which traumatic memories can be expressed and integrated. By "listening to the voice of the wound": acknowledging the "otherness" of trauma, individuals can witness their own experiences while connecting with others who share similar traumas (Caruth, 1996, p. 8). Caruth's theory of trauma repair focuses primarily on the narrative and relational dimensions of trauma, exploring its psychological roots and historical impact, but does not explicitly propose specific steps in the repair process for survivors. Hence, this paper applies Herman's conceptions of recovery from trauma as a complementary theoretical framework. Herman divides trauma repair into three phases: "the establishing of safety," "remembrance and mourning," and "reconnection with ordinary life" (Herman, 1992, p. 155). The first stage emphasises repairing the disruption of trust in reality and safety caused by the traumatic event; the second stage transforms the traumatic experience into memory and gradually dissolves the pain in acceptance; and the third stage focuses on reconnecting with everyday life, particularly through relationships with family, community, or broader social structures (Herman, 1992). This framework highlights the importance of emotional expression and social support, recognising that trauma is not only an individual psychological problem, but is also deeply rooted in social relationships and interactions.

In the study of trauma narratives, in addition to examining the mechanisms of trauma formation and recovery, it is equally crucial to explore the stylistic features of trauma narratives. As illustrated by Whitehead (2001) in her work *Trauma Fiction*, trauma is an unspeakable experience, which is often expressed in narratives through stylistic elements such as nonlinear structures, temporal disruptions, narrative repetition, and silence to reflect the fragmented and intrusive nature of traumatic memory. These features are not only artistic representations of psychological trauma, but also reveal the deeper connections between trauma and socio-historical dimensions. Studying the stylistic features of trauma narratives helps better understand the artistic value of trauma literature and its unique role in expressing trauma, reflecting on society, and promoting healing, thus providing a necessary complement to the overall study of trauma narratives.

In the process of studying the trauma-forming mechanisms in this selected novel, apart from the core trauma theoretical framework, other related concepts and theories have been introduced to broaden the analytical perspective and further enrich the understanding of trauma. For example, Bhabha's (2012) concept of *The Third Space* provides a field for trauma narratives where cultures and identities intersect, revealing how trauma manifests unique tensions in multicultural contexts. Specifically, the cultural identity crisis caused by racial trauma, as illustrated by Comas-Díaz et al. (2019). Moreover, De Beauvoir's (2014) theory of gender analysis in *The Second Sex*, and Iantaffi's (2020) conception of gender trauma provide insights into understanding the formation and manifestation of trauma in the gender dimension by deconstructing gender roles and power relations. The introduction of these theories not only complements trauma studies on different levels, but also facilitates more comprehensive analyses of trauma narratives across multiple dimensions of culture, gender, and identity, deepening the understanding of trauma formation mechanisms.

Overall, this paper integrates Caruth's literary trauma theory, Herman's three-stage recovery model, and Whitehead's conception of trauma narrative strategies to construct a multidimensional framework for systematically analysing the

mechanisms of trauma formation, the process of recovery, and the distinctive stylistic features of trauma narratives. In addition to this comprehensive framework, this study also incorporates Bhabha's concept of "The Third Space", Comas-Díaz et al.'s racial trauma, Beauvoir's gender analysis and Iantaffi's gender trauma to explore the multifaceted dimensions of trauma narratives across culture, race, gender, and identity, and to reveal the multilayered significance and social and artistic value of trauma narratives.

IV. THE ROOTS OF TRAUMA IN *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU*

A. *James' Trauma Caused by Racial Discrimination*

Racial trauma is a form of race-based stress that refers to the persistent individual and collective harm experienced by People of Color and Indigenous individuals due to repeated exposure to or perceptions of racial discrimination (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). The main source of James' trauma can be tied to the fact that he has never been able to integrate into American society as a result of racial discrimination and exclusion. Cultural differences have been a major factor that has made him work hard to change his identity. James' conflict with his identity can thus be analyzed through Homi Bhabha's (2012) concept of the third space. In this space, people tend to redefine their identity through cultural hybridity. Born in American with a Chinese root, James feels out of place with the culture and society in which he grows up. Despite setting "himself a curriculum of studying American culture," (Ng, 2014, p. 44) to change how he acts and speaks in the school, he does not undergo any improvement in his situation and is unable to make contact with any of his fellow students. Although he tries to mimic the behavior of other children, his black eyes, black hair, and yellow skin together with other children's stares make him feel different and unwanted. He cannot fully understand the causes of the racism he has experienced, James eventually reduces it to the color of his skin and his lack of clear ethnic identity, for which James develops an inferiority complex (Kim, 2020). He struggles between two cultures, seemingly trapped in an ambiguous space where he belongs to neither and fails to genuinely integrate either side as well, eventually falls into the identity crisis.

Despite earning his doctorate from Harvard University and being considered as a member of the model minority, James still cannot completely avoid the racist attitudes he has been exposed to. Although he has a lot of expectations that he would continue to work at Harvard as a faculty member, his Chinese origin is still a hindrance at his workplace. Harvard prefers to employ his white counterpart instead of him. Sitting in this liminal space between the American culture that he was born into and the distant Chinese culture of his ancestry, James constantly faces challenges from the American mainstream culture, which repeatedly reminds him of his outsider status (Lyu, 2021).

The trauma James has experienced does not simply vanish; instead, it lingers, reappearing in subtle yet significant ways throughout his life. This ongoing impact of trauma, referred to as the latency effect by Caruth (1996), indicates that trauma is not just tied to a single violent event from the past. Instead, its presence is often unrecognized initially, only to reemerge and haunt the individual later. James never speaks about the humiliations he has endured, but this silence does not mean that he has processed or understood these traumatic events. The truth is that he temporarily suppresses these traumatic memories, however, whenever he encounters similar situations, the old wounds will resurface. When his son, Nath, faces ridicule from his peers, James is immediately transported back to his own childhood experiences thirty years ago. While changing clothes in a PE class at Lloyd's primary school, some of his classmates played a cruel joke on him by tying his pants in knots and hiding under a dusty pipe. The mocking words, "Chink can't find China!" (Ng, 2014, p. 90) echoes painfully in his mind by reminding his own traumatic memory. These episodes show that the racial traumas of James' childhood are never truly buried; instead, they resurface from time to time, reinforcing his sense of displacement between two conflicting worlds.

As a man of Chinese descent, James' trauma is rooted in his race. In white American society, he is an ethnic minority who experiences racism in childhood and, leading him to distance himself from his Chinese heritage (Lu, 2022). This sends him into a cycle of rejection, ultimately convincing him that he will never be accepted by white society and that will always be marginalized and oppressed for being a yellow man. Racial rejection and subjugation become a persistent source of pain for him. Even as an adult, the pain does not go away, leaving him feeling rootless and without a sense of belonging. This same unresolved trauma is then passed down to his children, which continues the cycle of racial alienation and suffering.

B. *Marilyn's Trauma Caused by Gender Oppression*

Gender trauma is a systemic trauma rooted in patriarchy, colonial culture and rigid binary gender norms, which manifests as the oppression and erasure of gender identities and persistently affects individuals and groups through social, cultural and historical structures (Iantaffi, 2020). Marilyn's gender trauma is profoundly influenced by the social expectations and constraints imposed upon her as a woman. This trauma is best understood through the lens of De Beauvoir's (2014) analysis of *The Second Sex*, where she posits that in a patriarchal society, women are relegated to the position of the Other, secondary to men as the second sex. Historically, women have been marginalized not only by men but also by other women who internalize and perpetuate this marginalization. This social conditioning made the role of a full-time housewife seem acceptable and even desirable—an ideology embraced by both Marilyn's mother and her husband, James.

Marilyn is an American white woman raised in a single-parent family in which her mother is a home economics teacher. Due to the fact that her father is absent, her mother tries her best to bring her daughter up, and she spends all her life in the kitchen, except for attending her daughter's wedding which is the only time she travels outside Virginia. For her mother, a perfect woman is firstly a virtuous wife and a good mother – that is why her life's goal should be to take care of a husband and children, as well as the house. This is why Marilyn hates her mom's plan for her because she wants more than to be stuck in a small kitchen all her life like her mom. Marilyn is quite certain that women are capable of living fully without men or anybody else and therefore women should be able to walk out of the home and into the world and live meaningful lives (Ma, 2018). Hence, she starts fighting with social norms in her style. She does not care about home economics which are courses that women are expected to excel in while she excels in science and engineering courses which are deemed to be for boys only. To avoid being the Other, she almost wants to run away from home to achieve her ambition of being a doctor. Ironically, this is where the bright picture of the future is shattered by the birth of a baby. She tries to go back to school after some time but, she is again pregnant and has to leave her studies.

Marilyn feels powerless in this situation, and it is this powerlessness that allows her traumatic experiences to disrupt the sense of security that allows people to live normal lives. It only aggravates her frustration and further enhances her feeling of being powerless in a way that is parallel to the life of her mother (Zhou & Omar, 2022). Caruth (1996) also stresses the fact that trauma cannot be put into words, that is, the aspects of pain and suffering of the traumatized subject are often internalized and difficult to be articulated. This is evident with Marilyn, as she has this overwhelming need to rebel against the norms set for women by society and especially by her mother. She dreams of becoming a doctor, a goal that symbolizes her need for independence and self-fulfillment. However, the social pressures and the unexpected responsibilities of motherhood force her to abandon these aspirations, relegating her to the very domestic role she sought to avoid. This unfulfilled desire becomes a source of pain, one that she cannot openly express but instead projects onto her daughter, Lydia, whom she hopes will achieve what she cannot.

C. *Lydia's Intergenerational Trauma Caused by Parental Expectation*

Trauma is not only an individual experience but one that can be passed down from one generation to the next, particularly when the original trauma remains unresolved (Caruth, 1996). In Lydia's case, the trauma she experiences is a direct result of the unaddressed issues her parents carry with them. James, her Chinese American father, suffers from the psychological impacts of rejection from the American society. His strong feelings of isolation and inability to become integrated are transmitted to Lydia, whom he hopes to be successful in the social integration he has not been able to achieve. For this purpose, he always encourages Lydia to socialize and to be friends with her classmates. Likewise, Marilyn's gender trauma, derived from her respective desires being suppressed by social gender roles, is also transferred to Lydia. Marilyn forces Lydia to succeed where she has failed. She does not wish to see her daughter enduring the same disappointments that she has gone through. Marilyn wishes that Lydia could do well in her studies and become a doctor—a dream she herself fails to realize.

This dilemma puts Lydia in a very difficult position where she has to deal with the pressure from her parents on the one hand and her own confusion on the other hand. Lydia's trauma is not hers only but a passed-on burden that is exacerbated by her parents' problems. Caruth (1996) has argued that whereas trauma remains unarticulated and unresolved it has a propensity to redefine itself and reemerge in the next generation. Lydia fails to fulfill these high expectations and this leads her to develop feelings of worthlessness and loneliness which are well-known signs of transgenerational trauma.

Lydia's tragic fate is the direct result of intergenerational trauma. The expectations that she has shouldered are not only about her own life choices, but rather the pressure that stems from her parents' unfulfilled dreams and social loss. This dynamic illustrates the destructive nature of unclaimed trauma, meanwhile it also highlights its capacity to transcend individual experiences and influence the next generation in a profound and often tragic way.

V. THE HEALING JOURNEY OF SELF-REDEMPTION IN *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU*

A. *James' Self-Redemption*

Trauma is not merely the memory of a past event but rather the repetition of an unresolved experience that the mind cannot fully assimilate (Caruth, 1996). Lydia's death is the catastrophic event that reactivates James' deep-seated trauma, not only because it takes his daughter from him but also because it obliterates his hope that she might succeed where he has failed—integrating into the very society that has rejected him. Lydia's passing thus forced James to relive the alienation and rejection that has defined his own life, bringing to the surface the unresolved pain he has long tried to suppress.

Instead of confronting his trauma, James decides to run away from it, literally and figuratively. He distances himself from his wife, Marilyn, and their surviving children, seeking solace in an affair with his Asian teaching assistant, Louisa. This relationship although gave James some relief could not solve the fundamental cause of his pain. Therefore, this is not enough to bring about a cure, rather what is needed is to go back to the event through the process of reconstruction of the story, as proposed by Caruth (1996). James' affair with Louisa, however, though momentarily comforting, only strengthens the walls he has put up around his pain so as not to be overwhelmed by it.

As his relationship with Marilyn deteriorates, James reaches a tipping point where the weight of his unspoken trauma becomes too great to bear. It is during this period of crisis that he finally breaks his long-held silence, confessing to

Marilyn the emotions and fears he has kept hidden for years. Caruth (1996) emphasizes the importance of speaking the unspeakable—the act of narrating one’s trauma as a means of reclaiming agency and beginning the process of healing. In pouring out his long-repressed feelings, James takes a crucial step toward integrating his traumatic memories into a coherent narrative, one that allows him to begin to understand and process the pain that has shaped his life.

The process of healing for James is not a linear progression. It is not a simple case of moving from one stage to another, but rather, a process of remembering, telling, and feeling for James. As Pearce (2022) notes, trauma is not about forgetting but how to live with the events that have taken place, that is, how to turn the traumatic memory into a story that can be told and thus made sense of. James’ journey toward self-redemption illustrates that through facing his past, dealing with isolation, and seeking reconciliation with his family, he is able to start the process of overcoming the traumas that have been left unresolved for many years. Indeed, the process of recovering is possible only if one learns to face pain rather than to escape it: to speak out and forge new connections that can offer the understanding and support necessary for recovery.

B. Marilyn’s Self-Redemption

Marilyn’s process of recovering from trauma can be examined through Herman’s (1992) conception of trauma recovery which consists of establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. In the beginning, Marilyn has a lot of difficulties in accepting the fact that Lydia is already dead and has committed suicide. Such denial is a common phenomenon seen in trauma victims where the individual’s mind will try to avoid dealing with the realities in order to protect them from further harm. For Marilyn, she becomes obsessed with the notion that someone has to be responsible for Lydia’s death, and this becomes her way of avoiding herself from the deeper emotional reality of her daughter’s struggles.

As Marilyn progresses through the stage of remembrance and mourning, she begins to face the hidden dimensions of Lydia’s life. The discovery of items like the hidden cookbook, cigarettes, and condoms reveals that Lydia had silently carried the weight of her mother’s expectations. This pivotal moment forces Marilyn to confront how her own desires and frustrations, passed down unknowingly, have created a pressure Lydia could no longer bear. The realization that Lydia is not the obedient daughter she appears to be—and that she is struggling under the burden of these expectations—reflects what Schwab (2010) describes as the transgenerational transmission of trauma, where emotional burdens are inherited without explicit communication.

In the last recovery state, Marilyn goes toward the process of reintegrating into society. She starts to come to terms with Lydia’s death, which means that she accepts her own responsibility for developing the conditions that lead to her daughter’s despair. Baysal (2020) explained that for people to recover from trauma they should not suppress or erase the memory of the event but instead make it a part of their narrative. Marilyn’s reconnection with her youngest daughter, Hannah, and her decision to let go of her resentment towards James, show how she is gradually breaking free from denial and guilt, thus turning her loss into a way of redemption for the family. This process of self-redemption is important because it enables Marilyn to find a way to heal as well as to stop the cycle of trauma that has been going on for generations.

Marilyn’s self-redemption then is not a mere individual process, but it is grounded on the idea of interpersonal trauma recovery. According to Herman (1992), genuine healing entails both the processes of self-analysis and the reconstitution of the relationships that have been disrupted. Thus, when Marilyn faces her past and makes amends with the family, she starts to break the emotional cycle which leads to the death of Lydia. This process of healing is significant as it shows that it is imperative to recognize the latent traumas that one may have, as well as those within the family to lay the foundation for a better future.

C. Lydia’s Self-Redemption

The roots of Lydia’s psychological trauma can be traced back to an event in her childhood: The main reason that has a strong impact on her life is her mother’s sudden leaving. Though Marilyn comes back, at some point, the emotional damage that Lydia suffers is long-term and includes her fear of losing her parents. Caruth (1996) notes that the essence of trauma lies in its unassimilated nature, an experience that cannot be fully understood or told, and hence remains perpetually re-enacted in the memory of the victim. For Lydia, her mother’s unexplained departure represents the origin of this unresolved past. Her subsequent actions—her compliance with her parents’ wishes—are attempts to deny and escape this trauma. However, this kind of avoidance is rather counterproductive because the trauma remains unprocessed and as such, it will persist in influencing the life of the victim in more and more negative ways. Living with their parents’ love becomes a tremendous pressure on her, Lydia has no force to oppose it directly; she opts for surrender and escapes. She takes on her parents’ unrealized dreams as her goal and tries to win her parents’ acceptance and affection by trying to achieve what they have not achieved. Nevertheless, this escape does not help her to overcome the trauma but rather aggravates her state of confusion and gradually destroys her identity, and she becomes imprisoned in a life of escape, isolation, and bewilderment. In the end, the enormous mental stress and the unsolved issue of family tragedy cause Lydia’s accidental death in Middlewood Lake.

In the work of Crockett (2020), the importance of narrative in the process of trauma recovery is underlined. Where the victim is able to articulate their traumatic experiences to express the trauma, the result is a disruption of the trauma’s repetition. Moreover, Teenagers need to express their traumatic experiences in a supportive environment, thus achieving

emotional recovery and improving their psychological well-being (Kamarazaman et al., 2023). In the course of the story, Lydia has a passion of wanting to speak out about what she feels, and what is happening in her mind. Whenever she has a conversation with her parents, she feels suffocated and wants to discuss things with her brother Nath as this would make her feel better. For the character of Lydia, Nath is the only one who knows her and the only one she can tell everything about. However, Nath's listening and encouragement do not completely cure Lydia from her trauma. As a result, Lydia turns to Jack, a rebellious figure, in search of solace. However, Jack's response lacks the empathy and understanding that Lydia so desperately needs. Narrative healing requires not only the recounting of trauma but also a compassionate and capable listener who can offer necessary support (Salam & Mahfouz, 2020). Deprived of the support and understanding of her classmates and friends, Lydia remains haunted by her traumatic experiences and the guilt of deceiving her parents, ultimately pushing her toward self-destruction.

Lydia's death can be also considered as a form of the ultimate act of self-redemption and, at the same time, the final revolt against the roles that are assigned to her by her family. For this reason, in death, she frees herself from the pressure that her parents put on her and the suffering she has had in her past. Even though this act marks the end of Lydia's life, it is also the event that makes the rest of the family face their own emotional shortcomings and thereby find a kind of collective redemption. Lydia's silent sacrifice through her death has become the final, unspoken but powerful confession and offering to her family, which helps them reunite with warmth and harmony.

VI. TRAUMA NARRATIVE STYLE IN *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU*

In the current literary trauma studies, the emphasis is no longer solely placed on the recognition of the traumatic event and its recreation but on the processes of memory and narrative construction (Whitehead, 2004). This shift emphasizes how and why certain memories are articulated within a narrative, revealing the deeper mechanisms at play in trauma representation. Using unique trauma narrative style, Ng is able to transform the characters' experiences in *Everything I Never Told You* into a portrayal of the deepest emotions and mental health states. The plot of the story is rather intricate and includes parallel, alternating, and reverse chronology which gives the reader a better perspective on the time. Thus, the novel not only reflects the stygian aspect of trauma but also allows the author to present the trauma from multiple perspectives, guiding the readers from ignorance to understanding.

The novel is divided into twelve chapters, in which Ng shifts the time forward and backward in an attempt to reveal the events that lead to Lydia's death. The chronological chapters (Chapters 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, and 12) are set directly after the event of Lydia's disappearance and deal with the psychological impact that the event has on the family. These chapters explore the effect that Lydia's death has on each one of the family members. On the other hand, the retrospective chapters (Chapters 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 11) employ the technique of fragmentation to convey the family's story before Lydia's death and how the family gets to where it is at the time of Lydia's death. Nonetheless, those retrospective narrative chapters are quite structured chronologically to recount the story from Lydia's parents' childhoods to the night of her death. This pattern of switching between the chronological account and the flashbacks creates a dual storyline that presents the causes and consequences of trauma, thus helping the reader to trace the relation between the past and the present to reveal the effects of the previous trauma on the present events.

Besides the complex structure of the text, the narrator with the omniscient point of view skillfully employs prolepsis to connect the events of the storyline and deepens the novel's thematic exploration of inevitability and unresolved grief. By shifting fluidly between past, present, and future, the narrative emphasizes the inescapable nature of Lydia's fate and the lingering impact of her death on the family. The use of present-tense narration, coupled with the certainty of past events, creates a sense of fatalism that permeates the entire story. The opening line, "Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet," (Ng, 2014, p. 1) establishes this tone immediately, intertwining the family's present actions with the foreknowledge of tragedy. This narrative technique positions the characters' lives as locked in a cycle of predestination, where the outcome is inevitable, yet the emotional weight of the past continues to haunt them.

The narrator's recurring hints about Lydia's death serve not only as foreshadowing but as a reminder that the characters' present and future are inextricably linked to their unresolved traumas. For instance, lines like, "Lydia was fifteen and a half... In five months she would be dead," (p. 161) reinforce the tragic inevitability, drawing attention to the emotional weight that hangs over the family. The manipulation of tense, particularly in statements like, "Years from now, they will still be arranging the pieces they know, puzzling over her features, redrawing her outlines in their mind," (p. 291) conveys the characters' enduring struggle to process their grief. This temporal fluidity, where the future remains uncertain yet burdened by the past, highlights the novel's central theme: the long-lasting, unresolved nature of trauma. The family's grief is not something that can be neatly concluded or overcome; it is an ongoing process, extending into an indefinite future, marked by a perpetual attempt to understand Lydia's death and their roles within it. This sense of unending grief underscores the novel's broader reflection on trauma as something that cannot easily be resolved, shaping both the characters' lives and the narrative structure itself.

Prolepsis uses the long time span of recalled time to condense the narrative into concise narrative sequences, disrupt the linear time, and produce the emotional impact (Brescò de Luna, 2022). It can be observed that the narrator persistently endeavors to contemplate the reasons for Lydia's mishap, while simultaneously making inferences, associations, and predictions in a repetitive cognitive process. By blurring the boundaries between past, present, and future, the narrator not only deepens the reader's engagement with Lydia's tragedy but also creates a cyclical process of reflection. This switch

between tenses allows the reader to view the events from different time angles, hence enhancing the reader's analysis of the events in the narrative.

Thus, skillfully managing the technique of the narrative time, Ng composes a multi-layered temporal maze, which allows the reader to consider Lydia's death, as well as individual miseries that are typical for each character. Such a structure of the narrative creates a rather sophisticated pattern that contrasts the origin of trauma with the consequences of the latter. It not only enhances the narrator's insight into the family's collective trauma but also encourages readers to connect past events with present realities, thereby deepening their understanding of how trauma begins and evolves over time. Thus, the novel's trauma narrative, interwoven with the chronology, flash-forwards, and flashbacks, produces a plot that addresses various levels of consciousness of the narrator, the reader, and the characters, which reproduces the narrativity of the trauma experience (Miller, 2023).

VII. CONCLUSION

This study, taking Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* as the textual basis, delves into an in-depth exploration of race, gender and intergenerational trauma, systemically analysing the novel's portrayal of trauma, the recovery process and narrative strategies through the lens of literary trauma theory. Firstly, by investigating the experiences of the three protagonists, this paper reveals how racial discrimination, gender oppression, and unresolved trauma exacerbate the intergenerational transmission of trauma through interacting within the tensions of family and society, which offers deeper insights into the mechanisms of trauma. Secondly, this study explores the complex process of recovery from trauma, especially James's path to self-redemption through storytelling, Marilyn's through establishing safety, reflection, and reconciliation with their families, while also pointing out Lydia's descent into self-destruction due to a lack of support. This highlights the critical role of social support systems in trauma repair. Finally, this paper analyses the multi-layered narrative strategies that Celeste Ng adopts in the novel, such as non-linear narrative structures, temporal disruptions, and prolepsis to demonstrate the fragmented nature of traumatic memories and reveal how the text strengthens its critical reflection on the issues of social inequality through the employment of the narrative form. Overall, this study not only makes a contribution to the space of studying trauma narratives in this novel, but also offers a new perspective for understanding the role of trauma narrative in revealing social and historical trauma, while calling for the construction of a more inclusive and equitable future.

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